

Red Cross job let professor see warring countries' backyards

By Ward W. Triplett III

Prof. David P. Forsythe may have more experience in the area he studied than most political science teachers.

Forsythe, an international Law and Politics instructor, spent nearly three years in the war-torn nations of Angola, Rhodesia, and others as the only American member of the Red Cross' International Committee.

Although Forsythe's involvement with the group ended in 1976, what he learned and observed still carries in to his lectures this semester.

"I think I understand politics and law better than before," Forsythe said. "I don't think I could teach as well without it. I would hope that UNL students get a better course because of my experiences."

The ICRC is responsible for seeing the humane treatment of prisoners of war, political prisoners, hostages, and other war-related victims.

"That is, when someone is seized or missing, frequently the Red Cross will get involved."

Forsythe first started accompanying Red Cross officials on their missions in 1972, plane-hopping back and forth from classes to Rhodesia and Mozambique before taking a leave of absence the next fall.

He was asked to join the missions after a visit to Geneva made committee officials feel he might be 'useful to them.'

So, from late 1972 to 1976, most of Forsythe's time was spent as a consultant, often in countries where armed conflict was common.

Forsythe remembers riding in a jeep across a bare terrain in Africa, along with one other Red Cross observer guerillas who were fighting the Mozambique government.

Learning plus experience

"It was kind of odd, seeing that we were in an American jeep with fighters carrying Chinese weapons. It was fascinating for me personally. I was able to blend academic learning with the real thing. . . up close and dirty," he said.

The Red Cross organization was only allowed into warring nations on the provision that all findings be kept confidential. "Anything but the details," Forsythe said, could be reported to the world press. The main reports went to the government involved.

"What we did was to check to try to find missing persons or cases of torture or war crimes. It's common knowledge that Israel has Arab prisoners, locked up without a trial. Whether there was torture going was our interest," he said.

"If something really terrible was going on, we would

inform that government, not the free press, and give them six months to do something about it.

"If we came back, and nothing had changed, then we issued a press release that said something to the effect that 'We are postponing our visits to Portugal until'...they were always general, but any one who cared could figure out what we meant."

The trip had various values to Forsythe.

One was the chance to see the 'backyards of countries' that westerners rarely, if ever, see first hand. Assignments in Africa, for example, often led to virtual wastelands or jungles, where there were no paved roads, no plumbing, and fighting breaking out. This was really rural Africa, not where you'd go on vacation," he said.

He said he also liked the exchange of ideas, not on political science itself, but on understanding the views of other nation's citizens.

World looks different

"When you're down in Angola somewhere, the world looks totally different, the issues come from a different hierarchy. The U.S.-Soviet Union struggle doesn't seem so important. Here the issue is racism, these people are in war," he said. "You understand the Black Africans problem, you understand the political prisoners' problem, you get the depth of feeling you wouldn't get otherwise."

Though living in countries while there were battles and threats of battles going on, Forsythe rarely came in contact with a life and death situation, though he said it was a possibility.

"Several Red Crossers were killed in Lebanon, a few in Rhodesia, but there was not much shooting where I was. It could have happened to me, but thankfully it didn't," Forsythe said. The biggest scare came from a pilots' error while Forsythe and other Red Crossers were preparing to embark from the shores of Mozambique, only to crash a short distance from take-off.

"We were taking a plane out because the guerilla's we were with were planning on blowing up the bridge in the road ahead. As it turned out, the road would have been safer," he said.

Back in Nebraska, because of its climate and scenery, Forsythe has few plans for returning to that.

"I enjoy teaching in general. I like living here. I enjoy the life of a professor—that's why I came back," he said. Also, the ICRC (not to be confused with the International Red Cross that is widespread in the United States) is made up almost totally of Swiss workers, so it avoids influence from either the United State or the Soviet Union.

Forsythe was, to the best of his recollection, the only American involved in ICRC in the organization's history.

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